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C O N F I D E N T I A L ANKARA 001527

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/15/2017

TAGS: MARR MOPS PTER TU IZ

SUBJECT: TURKEY: DEPUTY DEFENSE CHIEF DISMISSES RUMORS OF
MILITARY "BUFFER ZONE" IN IRAQ

REF: A. ANKARA 1482

1B. ANKARA 1441
1C. ANKARA 1318

Classified By: Ambassador Ross Wilson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Deputy Chief of Staff (DCHOD) GEN Ergin Saygun claimed on June 14 that, contrary to rampant press speculation, the Turkish military is not planning to impose a security buffer zone in northern Iraqi territory along the shared border. At the same time, he emphasized there must be tighter border control and stressed the need to eliminate PKK camps close to the border. He criticized the recent transfer of security authority to the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) as a significant step towards Kurdish independence. While press speculation about a Turkish buffer zone in northern Iraq is receding, the GOT is looking at ways to strengthen border controls, including through establishment of restricted areas on the Turkish side described ref b. END SUMMARY

12. (C) Widespread press reporting following the June 12 security summit called by PM Erdogan and attended by FM Gul, CHOD Buyukanit, DCHOD Saygun and Jandarma Commander GEN Kosaner (ref a), stated that the government and military had agreed, among other things, for the military to establish a 15-20 kilometer buffer zone along the Iraqi side of the border in order to prevent the infiltration of PKK terrorists into Turkey. The press has speculated that such a move would be approved at a National Security Council meeting planned for June 20, and that the U.S. and Iraq would be consulted. Other press reporting has Turkish units already setting up barriers and obstacles on both sides of the border. (Note: The shared border is 218 miles long, much of it mountainous and accessible only with great difficulty. End Note).

13. (C) Foreign Ministry contacts have professed to be unaware of any change in Turkish policy along the border. In a meeting with U.S. officials on June 14, General Saygun dismissed the press reports as "crazy." He explained that the last time Turkey even considered setting up controls on the Iraqi side of the border was in 1998, when the U.S. was poised to bomb Iraq and Turkish authorities were looking at ways to manage the potential influx of refugees. He did stress, however, that the border must be controlled on both sides. Turkey is controlling its side of the border; if the Iraqis cannot do the same on their side, someone else should. DCM agreed that securing the border is a key task and asked if the GOT had any new ideas for accomplishing it. She noted

that Turkey had raised the possibility of securing areas on both sides of the border during the Ralston-Baser process. Saygun responded that Turkey is willing to discuss border security further but also wants to see PKK camps near the Turkey-Iraq border eliminated.

¶4. (C) In this context, Saygun characterized the May 30 transfer of security authority to the KRG as an unwise move which reinforced de facto Kurdish control of the area, hastening the dissolution of Iraq and the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. DCM emphasized that this was part of a larger, ongoing process to restore authority to the Iraqi people and that other regions had been granted security authority beforehand. The MNF-I presence in northern Iraq remained and nothing has changed on the ground.

¶5. (C) Comment. While disavowing any intent to create a large and ultimately impractical buffer zone on Iraqi territory, the government and military continue to look for ways to better secure the Turkey-Iraq border against terrorist infiltration, especially from PKK camps in Iraq close to the border. The creation of restricted areas in three provinces along the border as well as Turkey's interest in acquiring UAVs and other surveillance platforms are examples. We are emphasizing to Turkish officials that securing the border is most effective when it is done cooperatively with neighboring states and have solicited their ideas for doing this more effectively. End Comment.

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